Johnson: Thank you, Jordan, for this interview, Before we get started-- I mean when we get started. As we get started, can you...we can start off with...can you give us some of your background and how you found Midd, how you got into golfing, and any other things about how you got into sports.

Bessalel: Yeah, absolutely. Well I grew up-- I've been playing golf since I was about four-years-old, but I played other sports, like soccer or basketball, baseball. And sort of narrowed in from there when I found out I wasn't half bad at golf. And so, I started really playing competitively when I was about ten or eleven years old, going traveling around. I grew up in the D.C. area, so I would travel around on weekends and during the summer to just go play some golf tournaments. It was something that I could share with my dad. That's how I originally got into golf, was that he kind of wanted someone to go play with and wanted an excuse to go to the golf course. So yeah, I played with him a lot growing up and have very fond memories with him of taking road trips and being able to spend my summers that way. To just grow up and play a lot of competitive tournaments.

When I was thinking about what I wanted to do with college, whether I wanted to play in college or not. I knew that I would regret it if I went to a place where I wasn't able to play in college, knowing that I had the opportunity to do so I was sort of deciding between Division I and Division III, and what really stuck out to me was the NESCACS was the balance that I could get between the athletic and academic experience. I thought it was really a more holistic experience for me and really what I wanted to get to be able to have a normal student life, where it wasn't just all dominated by playing golf. I really felt my efforts in terms of where I wanted to go toward NESCACs. I'm really fortunate to say that I went to this recruiting camp actually in Ireland, where I met the Middlebury coach, Coach Beaney. Things just went from there. It really clicked. I loved the culture that he created on the team. He had a long history of coaching hockey and coaching golf, both of which were very successful. And so, I knew that playing for Coach Beaney would be beneficial experience for me, not just on the golf course but just as a person, as well. It's been really great. I'm *very* lucky to say that I was able to play for Coach Beaney...join a large group of people who can say that coming through Middlebury. It was a really great experience, and I'm *so* glad that I chose Middlebury.

Johnson: You talked a little bit about the culture that he was creating and that he has at Midd. Can you share more about what is the team culture of the men's golf team at Middlebury? Socially and on the course?

Bessalel: Golf is kind of a weird sport, given that it's such a small team and so individual. In normal competition it changes a little, and with COVID there were changes with that. In a normal competition, you don't really see any of your teammates when you're actually on the course. It's really sort of siloed. All you can really do is focus on yourself. So I know with a lot of golf teams that creates a weird conflict of interest there. You're competing for playing time and you sort of want to beat the person ahead of you to get into the actual tournaments. There's about ten to thirteen people in any given year, and you can only take five or six to a competition. By definition, about half the people don't actually go to tournaments. But at Middlebury, it was really, really sort of a collaborative sort of culture. You want the best team to go out there. And I found that whether I was traveling or not every weekend, I always had faith it was the best people out there that could give the team the best chance of success. I was always rooting for people to do well. If they were doing better than me, then hats off to them. They deserve to

play in the tournament rather than me. And I think everyone really bought into that attitude during my four years here. I think it's to the credit of what Coach Beaney is able to build. He emphasizes a lot of his recruiting methods on bringing in people who he thinks will mesh well together, and that involves all different sorts of personalities, people from different backgrounds and growing up. And it all works very well together. The team was very close in my four years here. I think part of that is being such a small team. We all spend so much time together, whether that's hanging out on the weekends or getting meals together after practice. Or even in the offseason, a lot of us would just get meals together anyway. It just created a really great atmosphere. We were all friends and wanted to succeed. I'm really fortunate to have been a part of that.

Johnson: You said played better than you..you got Rookie of the Year and then this year, you got Player of the Year. I'm like, how-- it seems pretty hard to play better than you!

Okay, you spoke a little about the balance you can have at the NESCAC-level. So, what communities did you have outside of the golf team at Middlebury, that you were able to explore because of that balance?

Bessalel: I got involved-- I played a little squash in high school and so I got involved in that. Middlebury has *great* facilities. Really the athletic center overall is awesome. That is also a decent reason for why I wanted to come to the school: the state-of-the-art facilities, for sure. But, yeah I got involved with that. I found a community of people to play some squash with, which was a lot of fun. And I also got involved with the investment club. So I kind of early on in my college experience figured out that I wanted to go into the business world, and that was something that was really helpful for me, kind of leveraging the Middlebury network. Since it's such a small school, it's kind of fun to see how close people are and how much people want to help Middlebury students find good jobs and good opportunities after school. That was definitely something I was glad to be a part of and plug myself into the Middlebury network, because that was something I didn't entirely know going in, that it was that close-knit of community, that close-knit of a bond. I guess if you go to school in the middle of nowhere in the mountains, people get pretty close. You know, I've sort of bought into that and I want to help future Middlebury kids in the same way they've helped me. I think that was a really cool part of the experience.

Johnson: I think that's so nice that you want to help the Middlebury kids...you want to help Middlebury kids like you experienced.

What was the transition like from high school to coming to Middlebury. I want to ask that also because you were able to experience a lot of success fairly early at Middlebury in golf.

Bessalel: It was definitely a bit of a weird transition. Part of that is due to the golf season being both fall and spring. Basically for the first five, six weeks of school, I couldn't really go out and meet people. I was either studying for my classes or going to golf tournaments. That definitely made it a bit strange coming in. The transition was pretty good for me; it was fairly easy. I played...you know, resulting in being awarded the Rookie of the Year honor, which I was pleasantly surprised about at the time. The transition was great, which also speaks for the community of the school. Even though I wasn't able to meet that many people who I wasn't immediately hallmates with coming in or in classes with, I felt like I could sort of plug myself into the community after that. And was able to make some pretty good friends going

forward who weren't specifically in that golf team, immediate nucleus. I think that's another reason why the golf team is so close. Those first few weeks of school, you're only seeing your teammates, which is kind of cool.

Johnson: And this past year, specifically with the athletic department, there's been a focus specifically on Black Lives Matter and race in the DEI aspect of Middlebury athletics. We even had a Black Lives Matter week, and I'd love to hear what the golf team did for that and your general thoughts on the department focus, emphasis on DEI.

Bessalel: I think golf has a specific reputation of sort of being an elitist sport. There's a lot of barriers to entry. It's very expensive to get clubs and play at nicest places, and so we had a lot of conversations surrounding all that happened in 2020, with the tense race relations and all the problems going on in society today. Golf, it's in a little bit of a weird position. One thing that I did in middle school and high school, and I'd like to be able to continue to be doing, is volunteering with The First Tee. It's an organization that provides opportunities who wouldn't otherwise have access to golf. To learn what the game is all about. The emphasis obviously there is a teaching aspect of golf, but really there's an emphasis on the life lessons the game provides, whether that be integrity and respect for the people you play against. I think there's a lot of good things being on the golf course has taught me. I think that's something the team could always do a better job with, but certainly, DEI was a focus for conversations on the team, specifically throughout this past year.

Johnson: What changes would you like to see in the Middlebury athletic department? Like within the next four years?

Bessalel: I'd probably say more community outreach, I feel like we could do better as a team. I'm sure every team is different, so I don't know if that's something other teams have done in the past. But I know that we could certainly do a better job with helping kids in the community learn a little bit more about golf. I'm sure that can be applied to other sports and teams, as well, in a sort of administration-wide effort.

Johnson: Since you're a more recent grad, could you speak more on alumni connections and forming those connections?

Bessalel: Yeah, definitely. So, I definitely feel [like] the Middlebury golf team every day does a Homecoming tournament, which helps. People who have graduated the past year or ten years before will all come back to Middlebury, so that creates an immediate built-in community of people. With the team, there's a large focus—not *everybody*—there's a focus of going into business and finance afterwards, so especially for people interested in that career path, you can see a lot of people and get to talk to them in a really informal atmosphere. Just understand what they do since Middlebury, how they were able to progress their career. It creates a nice atmosphere and [is] very laid back. You can build into more formal connections later. It sort of builds into a flywheel effect of if you're interested in one specific thing, they'll pass your name along to someone else and you can talk to about how they were able to break into whatever industry it might be. Golf team specifically, that's a really great way to get connected to guys ten, fifteen years older than they are.

Johnson: That's interesting to hear about, just you get to meet them in a much more casual way. At least in softball, I don't feel like we have that much alumni connection. We also were like the last sport at Middlebury, the last formed sport. So we don't really have that much alumni and there's not much emphasis on those alumni connections. So it's cool to hear that you guys even have a tournament at homecoming that people come back and that's how you get to meet them.

So I just want to end this interview with congratulations with everything you've done at Middlebury. Congrats on the ninth NESCAC title and your also individual honors you've gotten at Middlebury so far. Thank you so much for your time to do this interview.

Bessalel: Yeah, thank YOU very much. I really appreciate you having me on.